

BOOK REVIEW

JENNIFER P. MATHEWS. 2009. **Chicle: The Chewing Gum of the Americas, From the Ancient Maya to William Wrigley.** (ISBN 978-0-8165-2821-9, pbk.). The University of Arizona Press, 355 S. Euclid Avenue, Suite 103, Tucson, Arizona 85719, U.S.A. (**Orders:** www.uapress.arizona.edu, 1-800-426-3797). \$17.95, 142 pp., b&w photographs and figures, 7" × 8 1/2".

"Before Dentyne and Chiclets, before bubblegum comic strips and the Doublemint twins, there was gum, oozing from the jungle trees like melting candle wax under the slash of a machete. *Chicle* tells us the spellbinding story of what happened next."—From the back cover

Although the cover design is colorful, bold, and catchy, this is not a book for the casual layperson. Author Jennifer Mathews has produced an academic treatise on all things gum—a heavily detailed, multi-layered research paper on the 11,000 year-old story of chewing gum. With a 9-page opening section (acknowledgments and introduction) and a 50-page closing section (notes, bibliography, and index), the main content is only 88 pages. But with the help of black and white photographs and line drawings sprinkled throughout, this main section is a succinct yet comprehensive reference work covering four main areas: The Birth of the Chewing Gum Tree, The Botany of the Sapodilla Tree, The History of the Chewing Gum Industry in the Americas, and The Chicleros (chicle extractors).

Chapter 1 introduces us to the sapodilla, or chicozapote, tree (*Manilkara zapota*) and the varied uses of its latex, wood, and fruit "across the centuries." The symbolism and social consequences of gum chewing are also discussed relative to different cultures and time periods. For example, in 16th century Aztec society, only women were allowed to chew gum, mostly as a means of oral perfume, and any men caught chewing were viewed as effeminate or sodomites.

Chapter 2 was co-authored by botanist Gillian P. Schultz from Foothill College in California and covers the botanical details of the sapodilla tree, from its taxonomy to its medicinal uses. Chapter 3 walks us through the history of gum, from prehistoric days to Bazooka Joe. It is the longest chapter of the book, covering the rise of the commercial gum trade in the United States and the subsequent demise of the chicle industry. It concludes with the analysis that "today, chicle production has become a boutique industry that caters to consumers instead of natural products."

Chapter 4 tells the story of the *chicleros*, the local laborers/skilled artisans who extract the prized sap or latex from the sapodilla tree. Their story is an interesting one, a tale of misunderstood loners, commercial exploitation, hooliganism, legitimate criminals, and serendipitous discoveries.

Chicle is a great reference, albeit on a very narrow subject. If forced to highlight a point of contention, it would be that the author editorialized a bit in Chapter 3 in her quite obvious backing of one particular gum brand. I don't believe in free advertising for products I know nothing about, so I won't mention the brand name here, but Dr. Mathews had no such reservations. She promoted this specific brand of natural chicle gum, to the exclusion of other brands, and did so when impartial, objective remarks about the natural gum industry as a whole would have had the same impact.—M. Brooke Byerley, Botanical Research Institute of Texas, 500 E 4th Street, Fort Worth, Texas, 76106-4025 U.S.A.